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DE RUEHPF #0958/01 3561021
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1500
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2596
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1717

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PHNOM PENH 000958

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CAMBODIAN ABOUT FACE ON UIGHUR ASYLUM SEEKERS PORTRAYED IN THE MEDIA

REF: PHNOM PENH 954 AND PREVIOUS

11. SUMMARY: The Cambodian press has been following the plight of the Uighur asylum seekers since their presence in Cambodia became widely known on December 4. The media excerpts tell an extraordinary story in itself, and offer a revealing picture of the Cambodian government's reversal from originally accepting the Uighurs' status of "persons of concern," to eventually rejecting them as "illegal immigrants" with ties to a terrorist organization in China. They were ultimately deported on December 19. END SUMMARY.

12. Begin excerpts:

Dec. 5 The Cambodia Daily: Ministry of Interior spokesman General Khieu Sopheak - "the Uighurs are applying for refugee status in Cambodia. There are 16 here and they are under the sponsorship of the UNHCR in Phnom Penh".

Dec. 7 The Cambodia Daily: Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) spokesman Khieu Kanharith upped the number of Uighurs from 16 to 22 and stated that he did not know where the group was and that the RGC was waiting for the UNHCR to take the lead.

Dec. 7 Voice of America Khmer service: Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Koy Kuong said he has spoken to a UNHCR official who confirmed that 22 Uighurs, including three children, are now under UNHCR care in Phnom Penh.

"The ministry is now waiting for recommendations from UNHCR on their final decision for the 22 'persons of concern'" Koy Kuong said, adding that the government would cooperate with the agency.

Khieu Sopheak said Monday the government had not yet received any information from UNHCR. "If the government learns the Uighurs have no legal documents, they will be returned to their port of entry."

Dec. 9 The Cambodia Daily: Khieu Kanharith stated that the RGC had not received official confirmation that the group was in the country and would not speculate on the potential response. Khmer language press quoted Khieu Kanharith as saying that the RGC would not deport the group if they faced execution but he later denied this.

Dec 16 The Cambodia Daily: Chinese spokeswoman in Beijing accused Uighurs in Cambodia of being "wanted criminals".

Dec. 17 The Cambodia Daily: National Police spokesman Kirth Chantharith said the police have no instructions to round up the group and that they are "under the protection of the UNHCR". Koy Kuong stated that "The UNHCR and the Cambodian authorities are cooperating with each other to interview them. Right now we have to discuss about the procedure to review their applications." He added that the interviews had not yet begun.

Dec. 17 Voice of America Khmer service: Cambodia is cooperating with the UN's refugee agency in Phnom Penh to determine the status of 22 Uighur asylum seekers who fled China, officials said Wednesday. China has meanwhile sent a diplomatic note to the government concerning the status of the Uighurs, said Koy Kuong, a spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"Our Cambodian position is not to do anything yet," Koy Kuong said. "We are waiting for the results of their interviews, because now they have received 'persons of concern' status. With this, they are not yet up to refugee status, so they are still cooperating with Cambodian authorities in interviews to decide who is a real

refugee."

Cambodian officials have said that they will return anyone who does not receive refugee status.

UNHCR's country director, Toshitsuki Kawauchi, said local authorities have cooperated with the agency. He declined to speak specifically about the Uighurs, but said there was "no information that any asylum seekers or refugees are in danger."

Dec 17 Phnom Penh Post: Koy Kuong, spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said Amnesty's concerns were "premature," and that the government, with UNHCR's assistance, was conducting interviews to determine whether the Uighurs are eligible for refugee status.

"China and Cambodia are both sovereign states, so neither one can put pressure on the other," he said.

"It is premature for Amnesty International to say that the Chinese government will put pressure on the Cambodian government. This idea is wrong."

Koy Kuong said he did not know whether the Uighur issue would be raised during upcoming talks with Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping, who is scheduled to arrive in Cambodia for a two-day visit Sunday. Dec. 18 Voice of America Khmer service: The Chinese Muslims from China's restive Xinjiang province, the site of violent anti-Chinese protests in July, entered Cambodia last month and were given a "people of concern" status by the UN refugee agency before they and were taken to police custody for violating immigration law.

"They are not real refugees," Interior Ministry spokesman Khieu Sopheak told VOA Khmer by phone late Friday night. "They will have to leave Cambodia in no later than one week."

Earlier reports said that twenty-two Uighurs, including three children, arrived in Cambodia overland, but in an interview with VOA

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on Friday spokesman for Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Koy Kuong, said authorities are now taking control of only 20 and have no knowledge of two others.

Dec. 19 The Cambodia Daily: General Khieu Sopheak stated that the Uighurs are "criminals escaping from China and involved with a terrorist organization in China. If they were really refugees, how did they know where the UNHCR office is in Phnom Penh? And when they arrived in Cambodia they had their people pick them up from the ferry. We don't care if China asks us or not. They are illegal immigrants so we have to apply the law. They are going back the way they came."

Koy Kuong stated that the RGC considers them illegal immigrants because they entered the country without documentation. "They came illegally, without passports or visas, and they violated Cambodian immigration law and they have to be expelled from the country."

Dec. 21 The Cambodia Daily: General Khieu Sopheak noted that 20 of the 22 Uighurs who sought refuge in Cambodia were put on a plane to China at about 9pm on Saturday night. "They were deported at 9 o'clock last night. They went back on a Chinese plane". He also said the government decided to send the asylum seekers back to China after an investigation revealed that they were criminals connected to a terrorist group in China, which he declined to name. "They were led to Cambodia by a leader of a terrorist group, but I do not want to mention the name. If they are civilians why didn't they report to the Cambodian government?" he asked.

Spokesman for the Council of Ministers Phay Siphon stated that the Uighurs were named in a "Chinese criminal list" and that the government had deported them because of its "obligations as a sovereign state". He attributed the government's decision to Cambodia's poverty, stating that "Cambodia is a poor country which cannot feed the Uighurs for very long. We practiced the law as written since they were criminals".

Dec. 22 Phnom Penh Post: "China has thanked the government of Cambodia for assisting in sending back those people to China, because they are criminals under Chinese law," government spokesman Khieu Kanarith told reporters after a ceremony in which Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping and senior Cambodian officials signed 14 economic aid agreements totaling US\$1.2 billion.

Dec. 22 Voice of America Khmer service: Foreign Ministry spokesperson Koy Koung responded to criticism of the government's deportation of 20 Uighur asylum seekers by stating "the international community continually urges Cambodia to respect the rule of law and that is what the government is doing in this case". He noted that the immigration law of 1994 had been used in this situation and that the law was applied fairly and without discrimination. Mr. Kuong also noted that the image of Cambodia will not be undermined by the deportation of the Uighurs since the government was applying its own laws to illegal immigrants who had entered the country without proper documentation.

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